



Continental Drift

By Russell Banks
ISBN: 9780060854942

Introduction

Engrossing and visionary, comic and heartbreaking, *Continental Drift* tells the story of two people from different worlds moving slowly, yet inevitably toward each other as they search for a better life. It is set in the late seventies and early eighties, when America is plagued with recession, unemployment, and unprecedented crime. It is also the dawn of eighties' materialism—when it seems that the opportunity to make a quick buck is no longer the privilege of the rich alone. Workers, immigrants, even the urban poor begin to believe that wealth is within their grasp. Bob DuBois believes it too. Literally overnight he decides to leave his seemingly dead-end existence in New Hampshire and move his family to Florida, a place whose climate, population, and culture are at odds with the world Bob has known all his life.

For Haitian Vanise Dorsinville, Florida is also the land of opportunity. Like Bob, she realizes that there is nothing for her at home—and everything awaiting her at the end of her journey. With fewer possessions, and a far more perilous route, Vanise makes her desperate way north and east, enduring rape, forced labor, betrayal, near-drowning, and ultimately the loss of her child and her nephew.

In his portrait of contemporary America, Russell Banks focuses on two obscure lives driven by yearning, spiritual strength, and the hope for salvation. Caught up in the currents of their desire, Bob and Vanise drift helplessly from one predicament to another. Without money, neither feels capable of changing the course their lives have taken. Why can't these two people find a better life in Florida? They are both good, honest, and hardworking; that should be enough in the fabled land of opportunity. But as Banks shows us, other, stronger forces are at work. Racial prejudice, economic disparity, religious and social conventions, and most of all greed stand in the way of Bob's and Vanise's dreams. In the end, Bob dies in a back alley of Miami's "Little Haiti," and his wife and children return to New Hampshire destined for a life not much different from the one they tried to escape in the first place. Vanise, having lost what little she had, is now bereft of even her soul—she may as well be dead. Both lives, wasted, disappear from view, as the world and others move forward to take their place. It is up to us, Banks implies at the end of this devastating novel, not only to acknowledge the experiences of these characters, but to make sense of the seemingly inexorable drift of their lives and grieve their deaths.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are your feelings about Bob DuBois and how did they change over the course of the novel? To what extent is Bob responsible for what happens to him and his family? To what extent is he a victim of circumstance and of those who take advantage of him? Do you consider Bob to be an "everyman"?
2. Banks compares the movement of refugees and other people escaping unbearable circumstance to the patterns of the earth's currents and geological shifts. How does this metaphor inform the novel? Is Banks saying that such human movement is inevitable and unavoidable? Are Bob's and Vanise's stories part of a larger, universal phenomenon?
3. What part does Vanise's religion, voodoo, play in her life and in the decisions she makes? How does her faith support her—and how does it betray her?
4. Even though he doesn't practice an organized religion, in what ways is Bob spiritual?
5. Given that Bob loves Elaine, what motivates him to cheat on her? What, if anything, does Marguerite offer Bob that Elaine can't provide? How is Marguerite's race a significant factor in Bob's relationship with her?
6. Family relationships and violence are common themes in Banks's work. What roles do they play in this novel?
7. In the chapter "Making a Killing," Bob meditates on the difference between hunters and fishermen, declaring himself to be the latter. Do you think this is true, based on Bob's actions and thoughts? What does this suggest about his potential for success?
8. Why do you think Bob decided to smuggle Haitian immigrants but not drugs? Is Bob any better than the smugglers with whom Vanise first traveled, who raped her and subjected her to such horrible conditions on board the boat?
9. Discuss Banks's narrative technique and the novel's structure. How do Bob's and Vanise's stories inform one another? When and how does Banks's narrator intrude, and when does the narrator speak from a distance? How do the italicized first and last sections frame the novel, and to what effect?
10. Why do you think Banks "killed off" Bob DuBois? Why couldn't he and Elaine have returned to New Hampshire? How does Bob's death—and its circumstances—support the novel's themes?
11. What makes *Continental Drift* a classic? Do you think it will still be considered an important book fifty years from now? Why or why not?

About the Author

Russell Banks was raised in New Hampshire and eastern Massachusetts. The eldest of four children, he grew up in a working-class, hardscrabble world that has played a major role in shaping his writing.

Banks (the first in his family to go to college) attended Colgate University "for less than a semester," and later graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Before he could support himself as a writer, he tried his hand at plumbing, and worked as a shoe salesman and window dresser. More recently, he has taught at Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence, University of New Hampshire, New England College and New York University.

A prolific writer of fiction, his titles include: *Searching for Survivors*, *Family Life*, *Hamilton Stark*, *The New World*, *The Book of Jamaica*, *Trailerpark*, *The Relation of My Imprisonment*, *Continental Drift*, *Success Stories*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter* (the latter two of which were made into feature films). His latest novel, *Cloudsplitter* is a national bestseller and has garnered critical

acclaim.

Banks has also contributed poems, stories and essays to *The Boston Globe Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Esquire*, *Harper's* and many other publications.

Banks has won numerous awards and prizes for his work, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowships, Ingram Merrill Award, the St. Lawrence Award for Short Fiction, O. Henry and Best American Short Story Award, the John Dos Passos Award, and the Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *Continental Drift* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 and *Affliction* was short-listed for both the PEN/Faulkner Fiction Prize and the Irish International Prize.

Banks has lived in a variety of places, from New England to Jamaica, which have contributed to the richness of his writing. He is married to the poet Chase Twichell and is the father of four grown daughters. He lives in Dublin, Ireland and summers in Cape Cod, MA.